



Testament: A Soldier's Story of the Civil War

Benson Bobrick

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Dear Mother,

I was very glad to hear from home this morning. It is the first time since I left Otterville. We marched from Sedalia 120 miles....I almost feel anxious to be in a battle & yet I am almost afraid. I feel very brave sometimes & think if I should be in an engagement, I never would leave the field alive unless the stars & stripes floated triumphant. I do not know how it may be. If there is a battle & I should fall, tell with pride & not with grief that I fell in defense of liberty. Pray that I may be a true soldier.

Not since Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* have the trials and tribulations of a private soldier of the Civil War been told with such beguiling force. *The Red Badge of Courage*, however, was fiction. This story is true.

In *Testament*, Benson Bobrick draws upon an extraordinarily rich but hitherto untapped archive of material to create a continuous narrative of how that war was fought and lived. Here is virtually the whole theater of conflict in the West, from its beginnings in Missouri, through Kentucky and Tennessee, to the siege of Atlanta under Sherman, as experienced by Bobrick's great-grandfather, Benjamin W. ("Webb") Baker, an articulate young Illinois recruit. Born and raised not far from the Lincoln homestead in Coles County, Webb had stood in the audience of one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, become a staunch Unionist, and answered one of Abraham Lincoln's first calls for volunteers. The ninety-odd letters on which his story is based are fully equal to the best letters the war produced, especially by a common soldier; but their wry intelligence, fortitude, and patriotic fervor also set them apart with a singular and still-undying voice.

In the end, that voice blends with the author's own, as the book becomes a poignant tribute to his great-grandfather's life -- and to all the common soldiers of the nation's bloodiest war.

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